

Examining Perspectives of Entry-level Teacher Candidates: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: This study examines entry-level teacher candidates on career choice, professional goals and view on a teacher's role. The candidates were enrolled in two elementary teacher education programs in the People's Republic of China and the United States of America. A total of 66 participants responded in writing to three questions about why they decided to become a teacher, what they wanted to accomplish as a teacher, and how they viewed the role of a teacher. Major differences were found between these groups in their responses to the first two questions but the participants used similar terms to describe a teacher's role. Characteristics of these participants are highlighted and discussed, and educational implications on teacher education career preparation, teacher/student relationship and impact of cultures and policies are provided.

Teacher education is regarded as critical to the quality of education in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States of America (USA). According to Cobb (1999), both countries "cite the importance of a well-trained teaching force as essential to preparing students to function competently within an increasingly technologically information-based society" (p. 2). However, to recruit, train and retain high quality teachers is no easy task.

The USA is faced with a major challenge of possibly losing 50 percent of the teaching force during the first decade of the twenty-first century because of retirement or younger teachers' departure from the profession (Goldberg & Proctor, 2000). Therefore, in its report, "What Matters Most for Teaching America's Future," the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) concludes that a central strategy for improving schools is through recruiting, preparing and retaining good teachers. Identification and application of a strategy can be done rather efficiently but it takes much more time to resolve an issue. Four years later, teachers are still in demand because the pool of quality teachers continues shrinking and attrition rates remain high (2004, Heller). To address the issue, Heller (2004) developed a guide of over 100 pages with an aim to improve teacher recruitment, training and recruitment from preservice education to restructuring the profession.

Similarly, to strengthen teacher education, the PRC has recently taken actions to attract high quality candidates into teacher preparation programs by waiving tuitions. In August of 2007, new teacher candidates (approximately 12,000 in total) benefited from the policy and were accepted to study at six top teacher preparation universities in the PRC (State Council, the People's Republic of China, 2007). These candidates are

expected to join the teaching force at rural schools when they finish the credential program.

Moreover, international comparison of teacher education is conducted between the USA and other countries including the PRC (Cobb, 1999; Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1995). The above authors compared the practice of teacher preparation, recruitment and retention in both western countries and developing countries to identify issues and best practices. One of the goals is to inform policymakers to help them make appropriate decisions related to teacher education.

Cooper and Alvarado (2006) indicate that a shortage of quality teachers is shared by both Western (the USA and United Kingdom) and many developing (Portugal and Hong Kong) countries. However, the difference is that a large number or up to 40 percent of newly prepared teachers in Western countries choose to leave the profession or do not go into teaching in comparison to developing countries where population increases at a higher rate than the production of new teachers. In China, one challenge is to recruit and retain teachers for schools in rural areas (Chen, 2003; Lin, 2010). Several factors that contribute to the status are identified: fewer educational resources and facilities, lower average family income and less support from family, in comparison to schools in cities or urban areas.

In the 1990s, Cobb and Darling-Hammond & Cobb conducted studies of international comparison between teacher preparation programs in the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries including the PRC and the USA. The practices of teacher preparation and characteristics of teachers in these two countries share similarities and also present differences. Similarities were found on gender (predominantly female) and candidate selection that depends on prior academic performance: differences were evident in income among the 12 countries but teachers of the PRC and the USA earned less compared to those of the general, college-educated work force and of other professions (Cobb, Darling-Hammond, & Murangi, 1995). Also, the study on teacher candidates in the PRC and the USA by Su and colleagues, published in 2001, was based on the data collected in 1996. Findings about the teacher candidates of in the aforementioned study include the following: 1) little ethnic diversity in the pool of Chinese teacher candidates, 2) Chinese teacher candidates much younger in age than their USA counterparts, 3) more male teacher candidates in PRC compared to those in the USA, and 4) lack of passion or commitment to teaching of Chinese teacher candidates because of the low status of the teaching profession and poor benefits for teachers.

Apparently, the issue of poor benefits for teachers identified in the mid 1990s and earlier caught the attention of the policymakers in the PRC. Adjustments were quickly made to provide more financial support to teachers. By late 2001, middle school and college faculty had become one of the groups of the top paid people in China, according to statistics of State Administration of Taxation (Beijing Youth Daily, 2001). Xinhua News Agency (2002) also reported that primary and high school teachers received a raise of 18.76% in 2002. Moreover, in the 2009-2010 year, the budget for school teachers in rural areas is 2.22 billion *yuan* (*renminbi*), over twice as much as the total (1 billion *yuan*) budgeted in the same category for the previous year (Luo & Han, 2009). This prompt response from the PRC administration is certainly supported by the social and cultural foundation because historically Chinese teachers in general had an honored status in the Chinese culture (Guo, 2005; Ren, 2004; Zhang, 1995). Over 2,000 years ago, Confucius

categorized teachers as one of the five most highly respected groups in the Chinese society: the God of Heaven, the God of Earth, the emperor, parents and teachers. Within such a tradition and social context, teachers are typically regarded and honored as authoritative figures (Ren, 2004).

Cavanagh (2007) confirms the reports on the change of income or status of Chinese teachers. In the opinions of the teachers being interviewed, teachers (especially in metropolitan areas) can live a stable life, do not have to worry about losing their job, and have high social prestige. “Current and future educators, in fact, cited the same reason over and over – stability – to describe what most appeals to them about teaching. Not only is the teaching profession broadly respected in Chinese society, they say, but it also provides them with a foothold in a country that is in a state of overwhelming economic flux” (p. 8).

In addition to the reports and research on teachers and teacher candidates, an examination (Liu & Qi, 2006) was also conducted on the curriculum design of teacher education programs in the PRC and the USA. This study investigated two elementary teacher preparation programs in the PRC and the USA. A comparative analysis of the two programs was provided in each of the following aspects: program admission standards/requirements, course requirements, field experience, student teaching and exit program evaluation. Findings indicate that both programs well reflect their respective local culture and include each of the above components with differences shown across all identified aspects. The USA program, a multiple subject model, features more comprehensive admission standards and requirements but is more examination-driven for exit program evaluation. It carries a larger total number of hours and longer duration of field experience and student teaching besides a larger total number of units required for pedagogy courses on specific school subjects. In comparison, the PRC program, a single subject oriented model, depends solely on testing performance for admission but implements a more comprehensive exit program evaluation. It clearly stands out in subject matter requirements in both breadth and depth. The requirements of foreign or English language, education research courses, and senior thesis add a touch of international education, which can serve to better prepare candidates for advanced education.

Furthermore, a number of studies on the perspectives of entry-level teacher candidates in the USA have been published (Lorton, Coffland, Brazelton, West & Kirsner, 1979; Gourneau, 2005; Su, 1993; Yarger, Howey & Joyce, 1977; Zimpher, 1989). Findings suggest that many future teachers entered teacher education because of their love of children, passion for teaching and desire to serve others. In other words, they did not enter the teaching profession for money or prestige but for intrinsic satisfaction (Gourneau, 2005; Su, 1993; Yarger et al., 1977; Zimpher, 1989). Additionally, future teachers acknowledged the impact of their grade school teachers on their decision to become a teacher (Fieldstra, 1955; Su, 1993).

With the results of all studies summarized in the literature review of this study, many aspects are yet to be explored. A study is especially called to investigate teacher candidates of credential programs in these two identified countries. In particular, a focused examination of entry-level elementary teacher candidates in two comparable elementary teacher preparation programs in program admission criteria, program

structure and goals, and type of credential in the PRC and the USA is needed to provide new information on the topic.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the entry-level candidates of the elementary teacher credential programs housed at two universities in Beijing (PRC) and California (USA) respectively. Three research questions are posed in this study: 1) Why did the teacher candidates of the teacher preparation programs in the PRC and the USA decide to pursue teaching as a career? 2) What do these candidates want to accomplish as a future teacher? 3) How do the teacher candidates perceive the role of a teacher? Since this is a comparative study, data collected for the posed research questions will reveal how the participants are similar or different in their perceptions of teaching and a teacher's role when they decided to pursue the profession. The answers to these questions are important to explore because of the following three reasons.

First, Malmberg (2006) summarized that less attention was given to teachers' motivation as discussed in two other studies (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Pelletier, Se'guin-Le'vesque & Legault, 2002). To examine motivation, it is important to understand what teacher applicants bring with them upon entering a program or why they want to become a teacher before they receive training. Such information would be useful for faculty of credential programs to make appropriate adjustments to better support teacher candidates and identify correlation between characteristics of applicants and successful classroom teachers.

Secondly, the importance of reflection in the training of preservice teachers is well acknowledged and explored (Cherubini, 2010; MacGillivray, 2000; Norsworthy, 2008; Ostorga, 2009; Sutherland, 2010). Reflection is a means for preservice teachers to examine their learning process by identifying themes in their own profiles (MacGillivray, 2000) and become reflective thinkers (Ostorga, 2009). Preservice teachers create their own professional identity by developing a teacher's voice when they interpret their experience through reflection (Sutherland, 2010). The foundation of the professional identity should be built on their pre-program background and experience to make an effective transition or connection between personal beliefs and conceptual orientations of programs. Preservice teachers have influential beliefs and practices related to learning and what it means to learn, and their beliefs and practices influence the degree to which they access desired learning outcomes when they learn to become teachers (Norsworthy, 2009). Therefore, profiles of teacher applicants would allow teacher educators to view and interpret who and where entry level teacher candidates are, which is a foundation of who they will become through teacher professional development.

Thirdly, different parts of the world are becoming more and more inter-connected. With steady increase of international communication, teacher educators are challenged to internationalize teacher credential programs to better train teachers who are responsible for preparing students to function well in a global context. To achieve the goal, teacher educators must be exposed to education and teacher education practice in other countries. For example, the higher education institution that the author is affiliated with has established partnership with a number of universities in the PRC. Communication, including on-site visits, has been arranged for faculty on both sides to develop a better understanding of each other. However, the existing interaction does not allow faculty to have access to more detailed information or in-depth study of teacher applicants in both countries as presented in the data of this study. It is hoped that this study would serve to

offer new information that can be helpful and useful to teacher educators on both sides as well as others who share the same interest.

Research Design

A total of 66 teacher candidates with 35 from an elementary teacher education program at a university in the PRC and 31 from a multiple subject credential program at a university in the USA participated in this study. The participants responded in writing to express their reasons to pursue teaching profession, their expected accomplishments as a future teacher and their views on a teacher's role. The survey results were themed and tallied by three raters. Nine tables and charts are used to present the results.

Participants

The participants were enrolled in either of the two programs that shared the same general goal to prepare graduates. They would receive a bachelor's degree and get credentialed to teach in elementary schools upon program completion.

However, the design of these two programs presented some different features. The program in the PRC admits teacher candidates as freshmen, and all its students must study four years to complete the program in cohorts. There were no prerequisites in the program. In comparison, the participants in the USA and their peers were first admitted to an undergraduate program of Liberal Studies. Only those who decided to become a teacher would apply to the credential program in their junior year while taking some introductory education courses as prerequisites. Their academic planners ranged from four to six years. The data were collected when participants on both sides were close to or on admission into a respective teacher preparation program. They were randomly selected from the two programs either based on the sign up time of their interviews or a course in which they were enrolled.

In the PRC group, the number of female participants (23 out of 35) is about twice as many as their male counterparts at 65.71%. Their age ranges from 17 to 21 with an average age of 18.4. Little ethnic diversity is represented in this group: Thirty-three of them were Han, one was Tibetan, and one was Mongolian. This composition reflects the national ratio with approximately 92% of all Chinese population as Han (National Bureau of Statistics, the People's Republic of China, 2001).

In comparison, the USA teacher candidates are predominantly female at over 90%, or only 3 out of 31 or less than 10% are male. The age range is much bigger than that of their counterparts at the ages of 21 to 31, and the average age is also higher at 21.77. In addition, this group features high ethnical or racial diversity that mirrors its general local population. The racial background includes white (32%), Asian American (18%), Hispanics (27%), black and others.

As a result, the demographic profiles of the participants are similar to the PRC and USA teacher candidates highlighted in the study by Su and colleagues (2001). Specifically, the two groups of teacher candidates in this new study also share the following characteristics: 1) there is little ethnic diversity represented among the teacher candidates for the Chinese program, 2), the USA participants are older than their Chinese

counterparts, and 3) the percentage of male members in the Chinese group is higher than that of the USA group.

Instrument & Administration

A writing prompt was provided to participants in both programs. The prompt asked each participant to “describe 1) why you have chosen teaching as a career, 2) what you hope to accomplish as a teacher and 3) how you view the role of a teacher.” There were two versions of the prompt, one in English and the other in Chinese. The English version was used with the USA participants and the Chinese version was provided to the Chinese teacher candidates.

For the USA program, this prompt was included in the teacher education program application packet and applicants must complete their personal statement in response to the prompt before the application deadline. There was no time restriction to write the statement. And all of the participants in this study were admitted into the program.

The PRC program, on the other hand, did not require an application packet. Instead, its admission solely depended on candidates’ performance or scores in taking the National College Entrance Examinations that are administered in June of each year. Therefore, the candidates in the Chinese program were asked to write the statement during the first two weeks after they started the program on campus. The participants were asked to write their responses and submit their statement in two weeks.

Data Processing Methods

Three raters read the written responses provided by the two groups. They first processed the data of the USA group. Three samples were randomly chosen for data processing practice. All raters used the following steps in their data analysis: 1) read each written response carefully and thoroughly, 2) highlighted or underlined all of the identified main points, 3) used a phrase to summarize all identified main points, and 4) recorded the results on the data summary sheet. After the raters finished the above procedure with the first sample, they shared their results, discussed any differences in their analysis, and reached a general consensus on the summarized phrases. They entered the results on the summary sheet independently and moved on to the next sample. The raters processed samples 2 and 3 using the same procedure except that tallies were used when a same response identified in the first sample was found in these two new samples.

The analysis of the responses from the PRC group in this set of data was conducted after the USA group was completed. Since only two of the three raters were proficient in Chinese and English, the third rater did not participate in the data analysis for this group. The two raters also did a pilot analysis by using three samples and applied the procedure adopted in the analysis of the responses from the USA group. They also phrased all identified main points in English based on the answers given in Chinese. Again, all of the differences in independent analysis were discussed between the two raters until a general agreement or common understanding was reached.

The types of answer to each question were assigned a number according to the sequence they were identified. After the number of participants who offered the same

answer was counted and tallied, the subtotal was converted to percentage due to difference in number of members of the two groups.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done by following the order of the three questions presented in the prompt. To answer each of the questions, a line chart was used to display the similarity and differences between two groups with all types of answer provided by both groups. Additionally, a summary column chart was created to highlight the top five high frequency items for each group to show the responses from the participants.

Responses to Question 1: Reasons to Become a Teacher

Figure 1 shows that the two groups of teacher candidates collectively offered a total of 30 different answers in response to the first question (see Appendix A). The data summary presents little similarity between the two groups. It is obvious that the Chinese teacher candidates decided to pursue a teaching career for apparently different reasons from their USA counterparts, or vice versa. Moreover, the summary chart suggests that the USA teacher candidates showed a higher level of agreement among themselves for each answer than the Chinese counterparts. More members also individually stated more than one reason in their response than those in the PRC group.

Among the top five most popular reasons to become a teacher for the PRC group, none of them was shared by any of the USA teacher candidates (see Figure 2). Forty percent (40%) of Chinese participants wanted to become a teacher because “teaching is a respected, noble and stable profession.” Next, the enrollment of 23% of them in the teacher credential program was simply because of their “score in the National College Entrance Examinations” and they were still in the process of exploring what it meant to become an educator. In other words, it was not really their personal choice to pursue a teaching career but they were placed in the teacher credential program based on their performance in taking the examination. Moreover, 20% either wanted to “produce high quality citizens for the country” or felt that they had the responsibility to “educate the future generation.” Finally, what attracted 11% of the group to the profession was to have longer (summer and winter) breaks that a classroom teacher can enjoy.

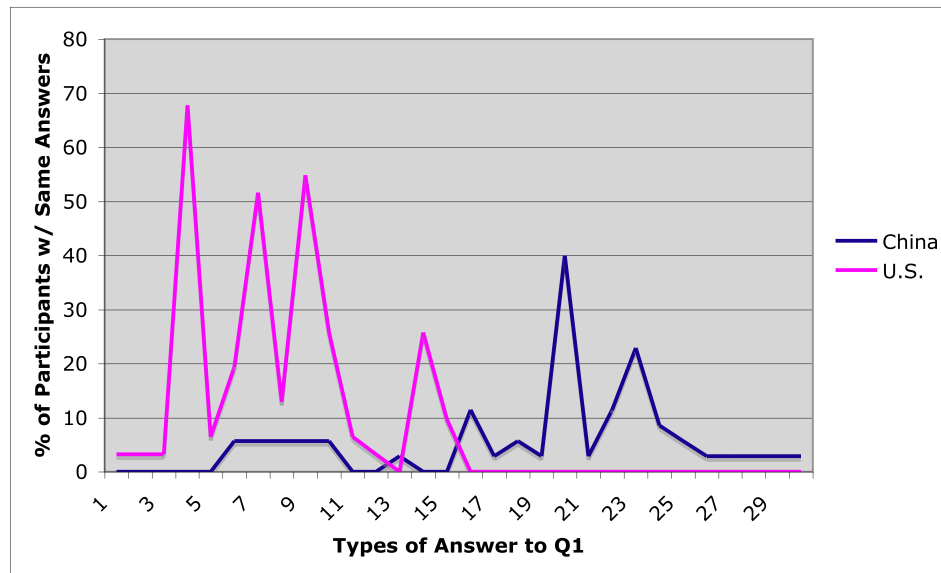


Figure 1: Responses to Question 1 by Participants of Both Programs-“Why did you decide to choose teaching as a career?”

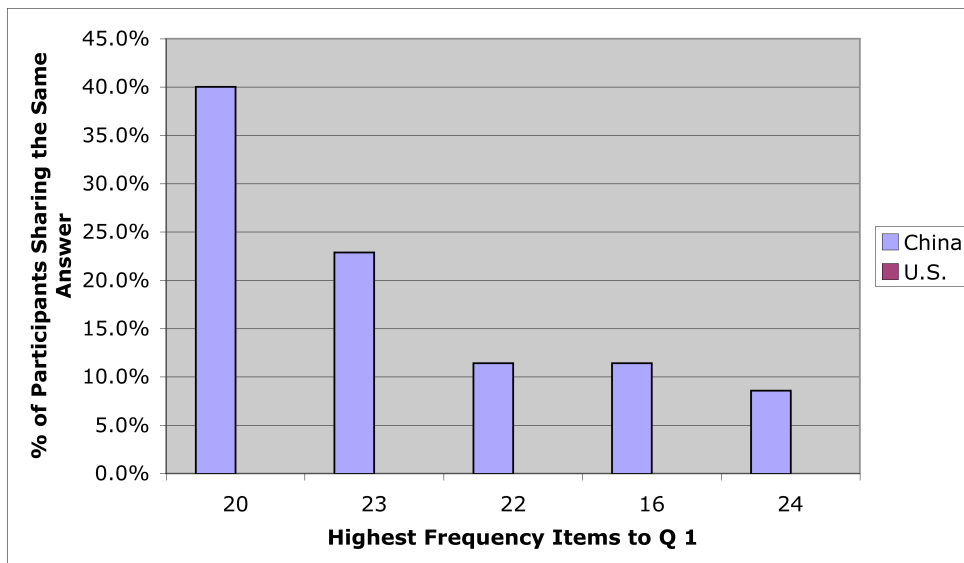


Figure 2: Top Five Highest Frequency Items in Response to Question 1 for the PRC Group

For the USA group, the top five most frequently cited reasons to become a teacher present almost a completely different set. As Figure 3 indicates, the majority of the participants or 68% chose to pursue teaching as a career because they wanted to “make a difference” in the world through working with children. The second most often stated reason by over half or 55% of them is because they “always wanted to become a teacher and teaching is their passion.” In the third place, 52% accredited their decision of

entering the teacher credential program to the “influence of a teacher” that they had as a role model when they were in grade schools. Finally, this group considered “feeling of (intrinsic) reward” as a classroom teacher (26%) and their “love to work with and be connected to children” (26%) as two other important reasons to become a teacher.

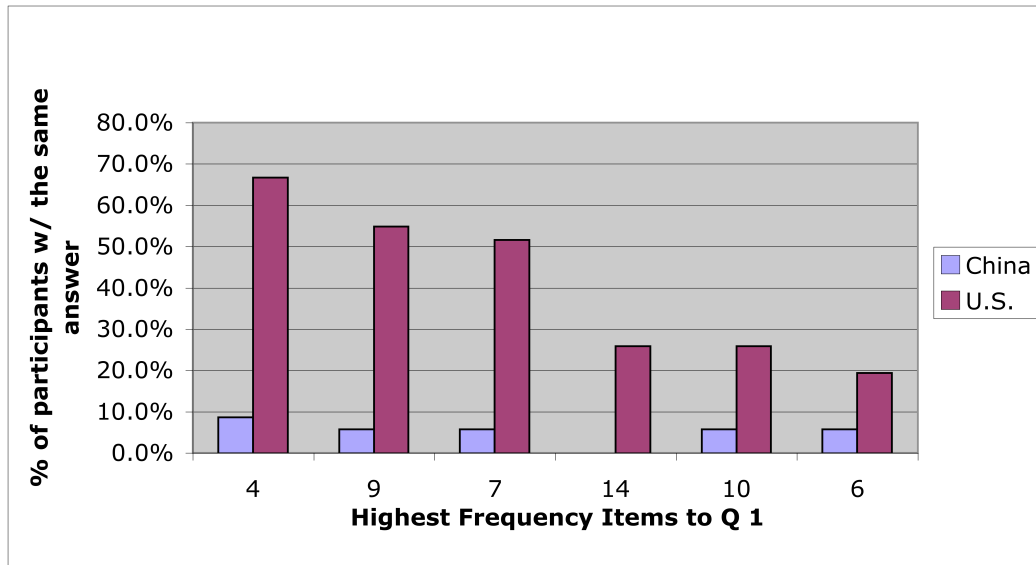


Figure 3: Top Five Highest Frequency Items in Response to Question 1 for the USA Group

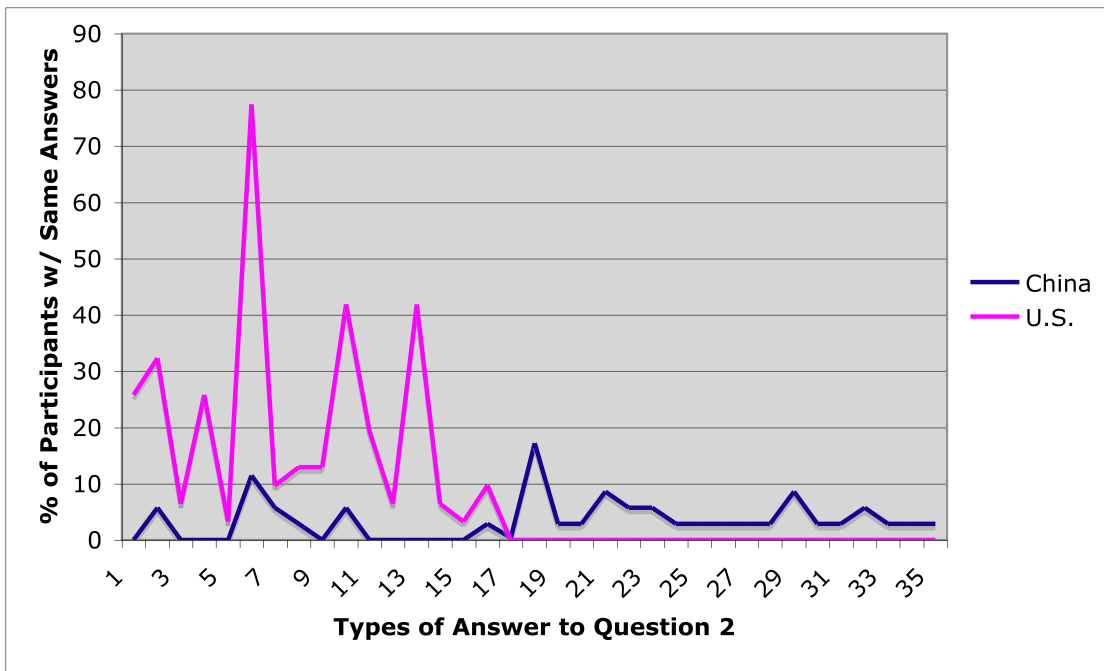


Figure 4: Responses to Question 2 by Participants of Both Programs-“What do you want to accomplish as a teacher?”

Responses to Question 2: Expected Accomplishments as a Teacher

In analyzing the response to Question 2, a total of 35 items were identified for both groups (see Figure 4), and a list of all types of answer can be found in Appendix B. Compared to the answers to Question 1, there was some increase in agreement between these two groups regarding what they wanted to accomplish as a classroom teacher. Moreover, the summary chart again suggests a higher level of agreement on some of the cited items for the USA group than for the PRC group, and more members also individually listed more than one goal in their response than those in the PRC group. To further examine the differences between these two groups, Figure 5 and 6 were formed to display the top five most frequently cited items for each group.

For the Chinese participants, 40% of them made it their goal to “produce outstanding individuals” (see Figure 5). They expected their students to become future leaders who have ambition and high moral value or be knowledgeable. The second most common goal for this group (17%) was to “produce a large number of qualified citizens,” or “*tao li man tian xia*” in Chinese. This Chinese phrase is often used in its culture to praise or acknowledge a teacher for having taught a large number of students who work and contribute in all walks of life. Next to the second most common goal, 11% participants wanted to “assist students to achieve educational goals,” whether they wanted to “see success of all students” or they intended to “prepare all students for success.” Also, this is the only goal among the top five for the Chinese group that is shared by a large number of members in the USA group. Another 11% of Chinese teacher candidates simply wanted to “be a good teacher.” Finally, 9% of others made it a goal to “earn respect from students.”

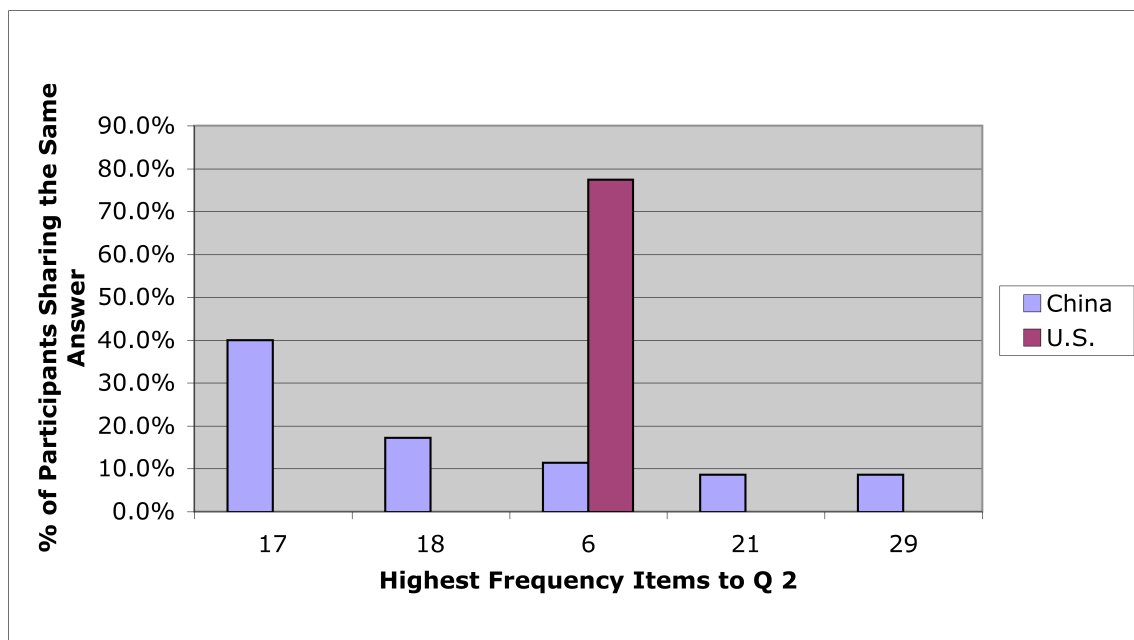


Figure 5: Top Five Highest Frequency Items in Response to Question 2 for the PRC Group

For the USA group (see Figure 6), the majority of them (69%) shared a common goal to “assist students to achieve educational goals.” As specified above, the same goal is also stated by 11% of their Chinese participants, ranking the third on their group list. Other than the above agreement, there is rather limited similarity between these two groups in what they wanted to accomplish as a teacher. There are two second most commonly stated goals for the USA group, and each statement was equally made by 42% of participants. One of the subgroups would like to “fulfill all students’ needs,” which is shared by two members in the PRC group. On the other hand, the other subgroup hoped to “instill love of learning, make school a positive learning experience or make learning fun” for their students. This statement, however, is absent in the Chinese group. Next, 32% of the USA members wanted to “teach moral values” to students, which was echoed by two of their Chinese counterparts. Finally, two subgroups of 26% each in the USA group listed the following two goals: “make a positive impact on children’s lives,” or “motivate students in learning.”

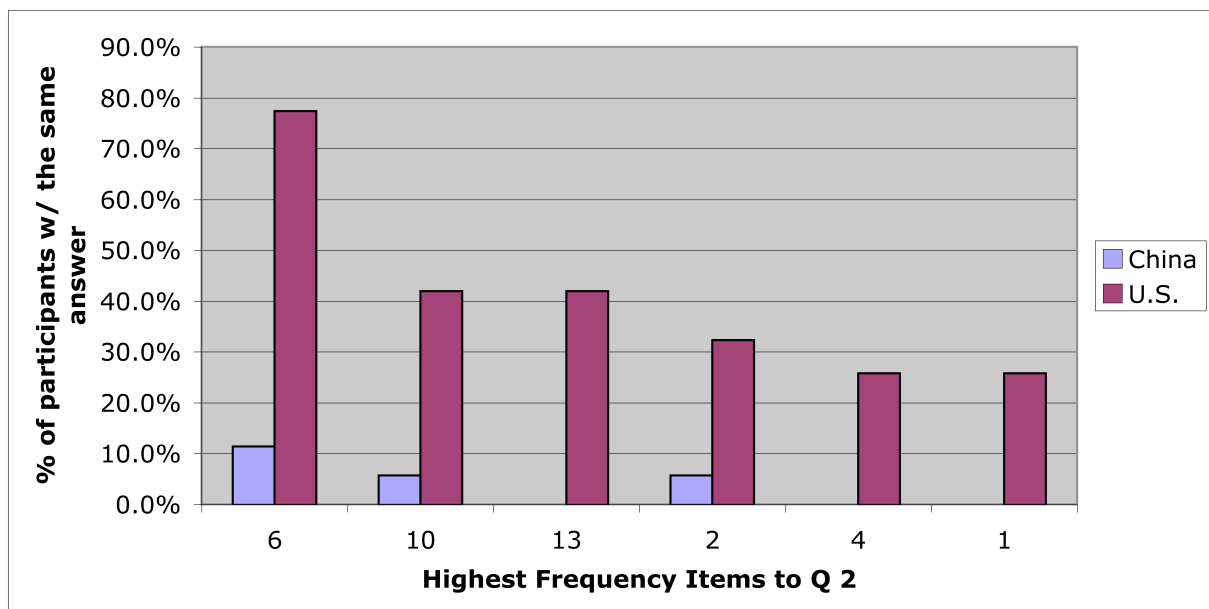
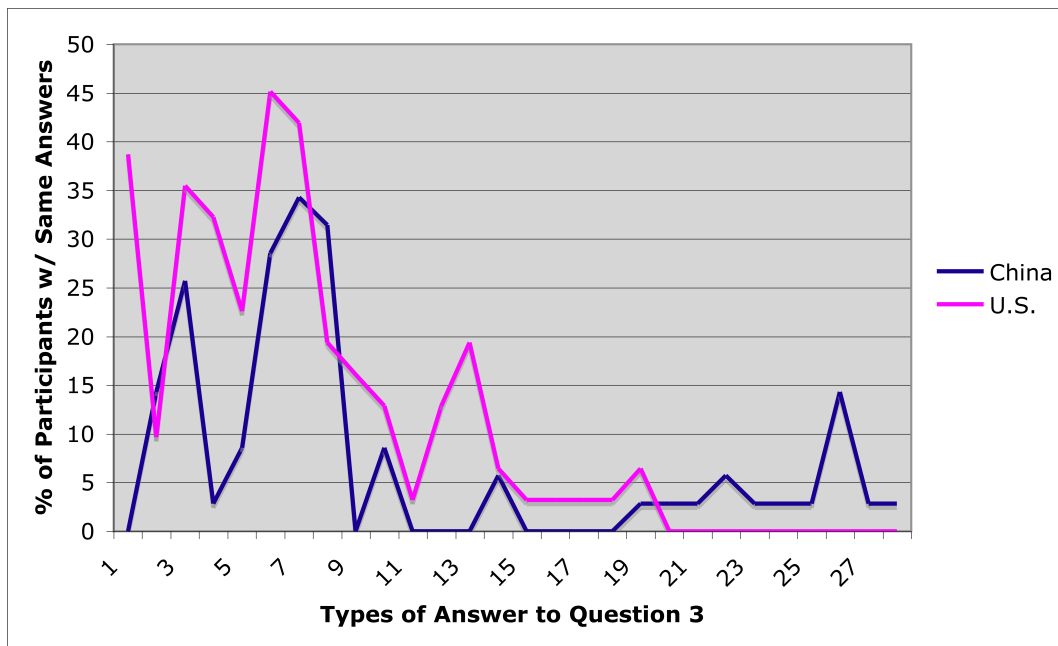


Figure 6: Top Five Highest Frequency Items in Response to Question 2 for the USA Group

Responses to Question 3: Perception on the Role of a Teacher

Appendix C is a complete list of types of answer provided by both groups as a whole. It is necessary to note the change in response to this question by the two groups (see Figure 7), compared to their answers to the first two questions. These two groups used similar terms to present their views on the role of a teacher. Details are presented as follows.



**Figure 7: Responses to Question 3 by Participants of Both Programs-
“What role do you think a teacher plays?”**

For the Chinese teacher candidates, 34% believed that the role of a teacher is to be “a role model,” which makes it top one on the list. As Figure 8 presents, the number of their USA counterparts who agreed on this is close, at 42%. Next is the second most popular statement for the PRC group: 31% of Chinese participants’ agreed that the role of a teacher is “to become a friend of students,” which is shared by 19% of the USA group. The third one on the list, “teach essential knowledge” to their students, was cited by 32% of Chinese teacher candidates. This opinion was expressed by even more USA participants or at 45%. Furthermore, 26% Chinese respondents recognized the importance for a teacher to provide support and guidance to students. As a result, they believed that a teacher plays a role of a “leader, guider or facilitator” in assuming responsibilities of an educator. Similar to the response pattern between the two groups for the most frequently cited items number 1 and 3, this one was recognized by even more USA teacher candidates (36%). Finally, 14% in the PRC group considered it part of a teacher’s role to “teach moral values,” and 10% in the USA group stated this view.

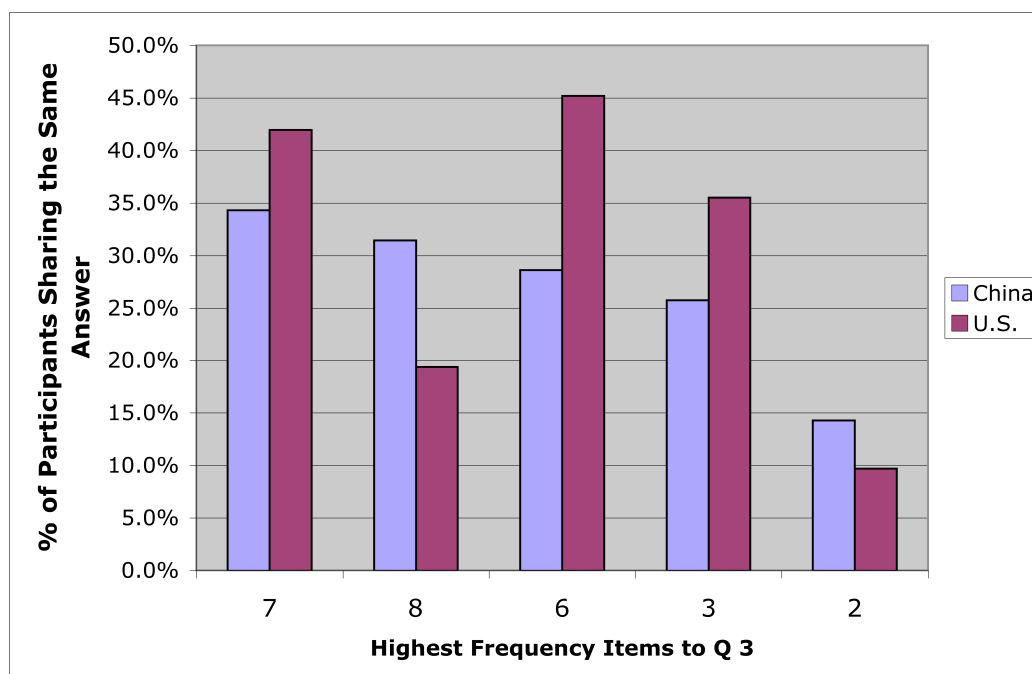


Figure 8: Top Five Highest Frequency Items in Response to Question 3 for the PRC Group

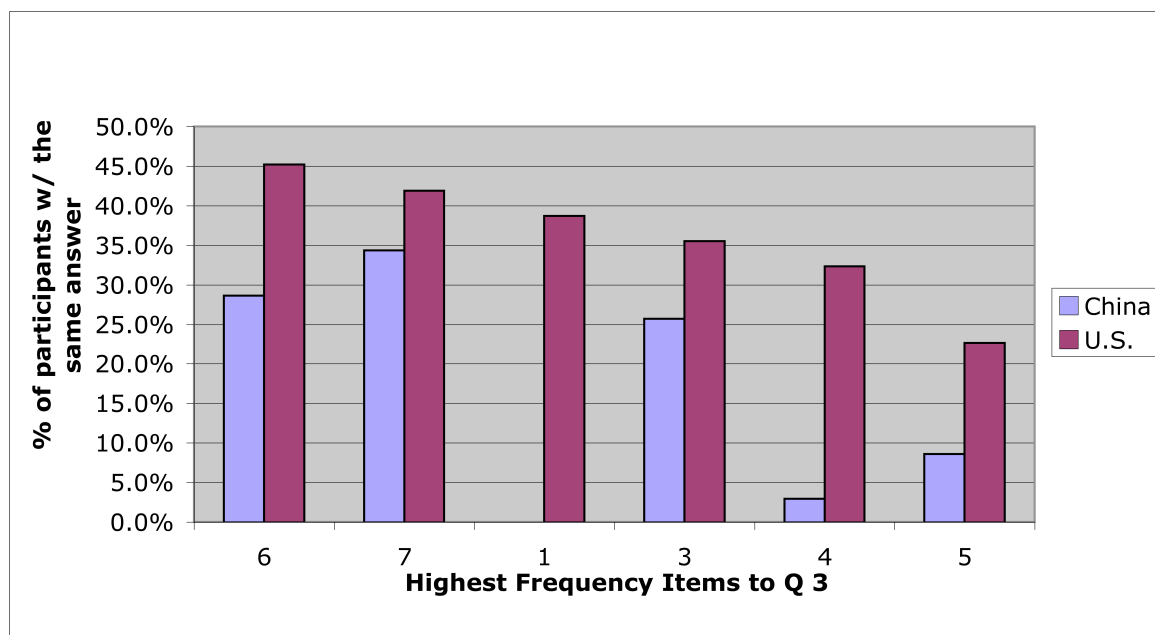


Figure 9: Top Five Highest Frequency Items in Response to Question 3 for the USA Group

Figure 9 is a summary of the top five highest frequency items identified in the USA group's responses to Question #3. Again, the similarities in the responses between the two groups are clear except the difference in the ranking of these items. The top one stated item by a total of 45% for the USA group is to "teach essential knowledge," which is followed by the second most frequently mentioned item with a teacher as a "role

model,” agreed to by 42% of the members. For their Chinese counterparts, these two items are ranked as number 3 and 1 respectively. The third most popular item for the USA group is that 39% of them considered it important for a teacher to play the role of a “motivator.” However, no one in the PRC group mentioned this in their responses, which is also the only item in the answers to Question 3 that separates these two groups from each other. Next on the list, 36% of the USA group considered it important to “provide guidance and support” to students, which is shared by 26% in the PRC group. Finally, 33% of the USA teacher candidates agreed that a teacher plays a crucial role in making “a difference in students’ lives.” In contrast, this item is not included on the most commonly stated list for the PRC group with only one tally marked.

Discussion

The data analysis clearly shows that these two groups shared rather limited similarities in why they wanted to become a teacher and what they want to accomplish as a future teacher. However, they seemed to reach some agreement when they voiced their views of the role that a teacher plays. In the section below, discussion is provided to interpret what the findings imply and how the information can be useful to teacher education.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic & Impact of Others

The response of Chinese teacher candidates suggests that their decisions to become a teacher were predominantly not driven by intrinsic satisfaction. The majority of them entered the teacher preparation program because of reasons that are *extrinsic* such as teachers’ social status, their scores in the National College Entrance Examinations, obligations to serve the country, tuition waiver or other benefits.

The above finding reflects the practically sole admission criterion of the teacher education program in PRC -- an applicant’s scores in taking the National College Entrance Examination (Liu & Qi, 2006). In such a context, when candidates are enrolled in a teacher preparation program, it is understandable that they did not pursue teaching as a career out of personal interest or passion. Since interest, passion or motivation deserves more attention in the study of teachers (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Malmberg, 2006; Pelletier, Se’guin-Le’vesque & Legault, 2002), would the Chinese candidates become better teachers when their career choice was based on their academic performance *and* passion for teaching? Would it be necessary for the Chinese teacher educators to reach out and prepare youth for teacher education and would such an action be helpful in recruiting higher quality candidates, thus improving the quality of teacher preparation?

In the meantime, the response from the PRC group confirmed Cavanagh’s report (2007) that teaching is viewed as a respectful and stable profession. This is also in alignment with the tradition of Chinese culture, in which teachers are highly regarded in the society. In fact, the participants did not only use the exact words, “respectful and stable,” to describe the profession but also offered other specific benefits such as free education and job security that attracted them into teaching.

Given the above status of Chinese teachers, it seems rational to assume that teachers or other individuals who were closely associated with these teacher candidates had some impact on the formers' decision to become a teacher. Surprisingly, the finding of this study suggests that very few Chinese teacher candidates accredited their career choice to the influence of their teachers or other individuals such as family members. On the other hand, by examining beyond the surface level and in light of teacher's relationship to others in the Chinese society, it does not appear difficult to understand this phenomenon. Because teachers are considered as authoritarian (Cheng, 1999), it may not be easy for teachers to reach out to students, communicate on an equal level, and provide advice on choosing teaching as a career. From the students' perspective, when they respect teachers as authoritative figures (regardless of their status of income or benefits), they may view teaching as a profession to pay respect to rather than a career to pursue themselves. Additionally, counseling in educational career service to get youth or middle/high school students prepared for the profession is yet to be developed in China.

In comparison, this group of USA teacher candidates, like their native peers in other studies (Fieldstra, 1955; Su, 1993; Yarger et al., 1977; Zimpher, 1989), decided to enter teacher education because of intrinsic motivation or influence of their grade school teachers. In fact, none of them cited any reasons that suggest high or prestigious status of teachers in the USA, which obviously sets this group apart from the Chinese participants. Furthermore, the application for the USA teacher preparation program was designed to admit those individuals who were attracted to the profession because of their love for working with children. Given such a background, it is tragic when a large number of credential holders who have passion for teaching leave or do not enter the profession (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Heller, 2006), which apparently deserves the attention of policy makers. Plans and actions are needed to keep passionate and experienced teachers in the classroom to improve the quality of education.

Local/Cultural Characteristics Revealed

The two groups' responses in what they wanted to accomplish as a teacher revealed culturally specific features for each group. The Chinese teacher candidates intended to produce outstanding or extraordinary individuals who will serve as national and other leaders in all walks of life. This may be an influence of Chinese history that an official's rank is based on his (male only) performance of examinations in a hierarchical society. Regardless of family background, a person would gain high social status by excelling in taking examinations. Similarly, the level of education is often associated with a person's income and social status in modern China. In addition to the "quality" of their future students, the Chinese teacher candidates would like to teach as many students as possible to touch their future. This goal may be influenced by Confucius who taught approximately 3,000 students (Wang, 2004) in his lifetime and was respected for his productivity in this aspect as a teacher.

However, the PRC group hardly provided any specifics on how to facilitate the learning process in the classroom to reach their goals. The Chinese teacher candidates appeared to have a clear target for their future students to be successful but did not express what they might do to help students become successful. In the credential program, pedagogy is not as emphasized in the China teacher preparation program as it is

in the USA program (Liu & Qi, 2006). Will their future students learn more effectively if these teacher candidates have an opportunity to develop high competency in pedagogy?

Like the Chinese counterparts, the USA participants also wanted their students to achieve educational goals although they did not specify an expectation for them to become outstanding people or leaders. The other items on the USA to-be-accomplished list are rather focused on how to help all students get a good education, which can also be culturally specific. In response to the diversity of student population, it is quite natural and relevant to have a goal to “fulfill all students’ needs.” This item is also reflected in the credential requirements, which is rather unique for the USA program. Furthermore, the USA participants wanted to “instill love for learning,” “make learning fun for students,” or “motivate students to learn.” All of the above are more related to the process of reaching a successful educational goal, in alignment with the teacher preparation program that emphasizes on teaching methodology or pedagogy.

Views on Teacher’s Role: Similarities and Differences

Despite the disagreement or lack of agreement in their response to the first two questions, these two groups shared very similar views on their perspective of a teacher’s role. While considerable level of personal background and experience connected to local culture or immediate environment is needed in responding to the first two questions, the third question seems to elicit answers that can be more instruction oriented, primarily in a school context where teaching and learning take place. For instance, a Chinese teacher candidate may have a focus on the final “product” but a USA counterpart may emphasize on learning process or pedagogy when both believed a teacher’s role is to “teach essential knowledge.” Therefore, although the two groups used similar language or wording to describe the role of a teacher, their differences shown through the responses to the first two questions can certainly be embedded.

Moreover, other differences as a reflection of the local context are clearly phrased by the participants. The USA teachers perceived “motivator” as an important part of a teacher’s responsibilities or role, and there is consistency on this throughout their response to all three questions. They also believed it critical for teachers to respond to individual student’s needs in teaching. On the other hand, the Chinese society and families expect students to work hard (Salili, 1995), which may explain why “motivator” never appeared on the answer list of the China group.

Limitations

The survey was the only means of data collection in this study, so the analysis solely depended on what the respondents stated on paper. There was no follow up or additional actions taken for clarification of the data from the survey. For instance, unlike the first two questions, the third one about the role of a teacher appeared to generate similar terms or expressions from both groups, which seemed general with no details provided. Therefore, it is unknown whether the participants truly meant the same when they used the same terms in their responses, or the definition of the terms they used was

the same. To address this limitation, further interaction with the participants via a more focused survey or oral interview would be helpful. This additional step can be taken to confirm the data collected on the first two questions, which can strengthen the data analysis of this study.

Conclusions

The teacher candidates in the elementary credential programs in the PRC and the USA have more different than similar reasons to become a teacher. The two groups also showed many differences in what they wanted to accomplish as a classroom teacher. However, they had seemingly more in common regarding their views of the role that a classroom teacher plays.

There seemed to be major influence of their grade school teachers on the USA group's choice of teaching as a profession. This suggests a closer or more equal relationship between teachers and students in the USA. In comparison, the Chinese teachers are primarily regarded as authority, which may reduce the opportunity for students to explore how to follow their teachers' footsteps. An individual is likely to admire and respect an authority rather than emulate. Moreover, the USA group tended to be passionate about teaching and working with children, while their Chinese counterparts' decision was more extrinsic oriented. This phenomenon can be affected by program admission requirements, availability of career counseling and other possible factors such as teacher's social status. To attract and retain as many high quality and passionate teachers in the teaching profession, policy makers in the USA should investigate and take measures to improve the status of teachers. Meanwhile, changes on the Chinese side seems necessary in providing career-counseling service for teacher candidates to be better prepared for the profession and to admit more candidates who are passionate about the teaching profession.

The teacher candidates of the two groups also revealed many different types of accomplishments that they expected to achieve as future teachers. For the PRC group, the emphasis was placed on the end product or student achievements but not on specific ways or methodology that a teacher could use to help students reach educational goals. This phenomenon appears consistent with the credential program design that stresses more content than pedagogy. On the other hand, the USA participants paid sufficient attention to what a teacher can do to help students achieve success in schools. Perhaps future studies can examine the relationship between efforts made by students and support from teachers. If the ability to learn independently is the ultimate goal in education, what role do teachers and students each play in the learning process?

The two groups of teacher candidates finally reached some agreement in their identification of the role that a teacher plays. However, the USA group continued to bring up the importance for teachers to provide support and motivate students to learn, which appears to be a very important point that separates these two groups from each other. Again, the difference seems closely connected to the design of teacher preparation programs such as the requirements of pedagogy.

To internationalize curriculum in teacher education, it is essential to examine teacher education programs embedded in different cultural contexts at a same given time.

As the results of this study indicate, the background and experiences of teacher candidates in the two programs are reflected in their views of teaching and teachers. This information allows educators of both programs and beyond to develop a better understanding of who the teacher candidates are upon entering the program in comparison to those in another country. Moreover, since applicants from China have been admitted in the USA credential program, the information about the teacher candidates in the PRC program can be useful for the USA program faculty to better understand who the teacher candidates of Chinese ethnicity are. Consequently, adjustments on the curriculum can be made as needed to better nurture these candidates' growth as they explore their professional identity in the program.

In sum, this study produced new information about the perspectives of the entry-level teacher candidates in the two programs using a comparative approach. It is hoped that results from the study would be useful to teacher educators and policymakers so that appropriate teacher recruitment, preparation and retention plans can be designed to improve the quality of education.

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Appendix A

Responses to: Why did you decide to choose teaching as a career?*

1. want to become a motivator
2. teach moral values
3. want to become a leader
4. make positive impact/make a difference
5. help others
6. ensure the quality of education / assist students in the learning experiences
7. influence of teachers
8. influence of others (parents/students/relatives)
9. passion for teaching (always wanted to be a teacher)
10. love to work with children
11. like classroom/school settings
12. because of lack of good teachers
13. teaching is a challenging task
14. feeling of reward
15. give back to the community/contribute to the future of the society
16. have more vacation time
17. have more free time for academic research
18. like peaceful and routine life style of a teacher
19. academic freedom/ have potential to achieve higher academic goals
20. teaching is a respectful/stable/noble profession
21. continue to grow
22. produce useful and high-quality citizens for the country
23. my score in the National Entrance Exam / still in process of exploring
24. have responsibility to educate the future generation
25. don't have to pay tuition
26. be responsible for contributing to the country
27. the university is prestigious
28. have a fulfilling life
29. be a role model
30. impart knowledge

* From #16 on, the answers were provided by the PRC participants only.

Appendix B

Responses to: What do you want to accomplish as a teacher?*

1. motivate students
2. teach students moral values
3. guide
4. make a positive impact on children's lives
5. help students/parents to get more involved
6. assist students to achieve educational goals/ see success of all students/prepare all students for success (receive diploma)
7. become a role model
8. instill self-confidence
9. challenge students
10. fulfill all students' needs
11. communicate/connect with young people (approachable, welcome students with open arms, come to the teacher with questions..)
12. build and strengthen the partnership among students, teachers, parents and community
13. instill the love of learning/ make school a positive learning experience for children/make learning fun
14. learn from the students
15. earn gratitude/appreciation from students
16. teach children to apply learning to life
17. produce outstanding individuals (future leaders / ambitious / honest / knowledgeable / qualified individuals)
18. produce a large number of students
19. academic achievement
20. further develop schools / universities
21. be a responsible and good teacher
22. be able to contribute to educational reform in China
23. improve people's education levels
24. receive the outstanding educator award
25. publish many articles in national journals
26. practice leadership in education
27. grow with the students
28. have a stable and simple life style
29. earn respect from students
30. promote Tibet's culture and traditions
31. contribute to Tibet's education
32. make a scholarly contribution
33. be more knowledgeable
34. inspire students
35. still in the process of exploring

* From #17 on, the answers were provided by the PRC participants only.

Appendix C

Responses to: What role do you think a teacher plays? *

1. motivator
2. teach moral values
3. guide/leader/facilitator
4. make differences in students' lives / prepare students for the future
5. mentor (helper)
6. teach essential knowledge/educate students
7. role model
8. as a friend of students
9. as a parent of students
10. counselor
11. assessor
12. make learning fun
13. meet the needs of each individual students
14. learn from the students
15. work together with other teachers
16. have impact on society
17. teach students to apply knowledge
18. believer
19. promote civilization
20. play a key role in producing high quality citizens for the future of the country
21. grow with the students
22. an elder person who has rich experiences and high moral standards
23. ordinary workers
24. be trusted by the parents
25. like a caregiver or "babysitter"
26. impart knowledge & clear confusion
27. like a family member (brother, sister or other relatives)
28. like a candle to give light to others

* From #19 on, the answers were provided by the PRC participants only.